

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1336

As Reported by House Committee On: Health Care

Title: An act relating to coverage for hearing aids.

Brief Description: Requiring plans that provide coverage for prostheses to provide coverage for hearing aids.

Sponsors: Representatives Flannigan, Morrell, O'Brien, Campbell, Kirby, Hudgins, Darneille, Lantz, Hunt, Appleton, Moeller, Kenney, Kagi, Dickerson, McDermott, Santos, Chase and Ormsby.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Health Care: 2/17/05, 2/24/05 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires health insurance carriers and state purchased health care programs that provide coverage for prostheses to include coverage for hearing aids.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH CARE

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Cody, Chair; Campbell, Vice Chair; Morrell, Vice Chair; Appleton, Clibborn, Green, Lantz, Moeller and Schual-Berke.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 5 members: Representatives Bailey, Ranking Minority Member; Curtis, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Alexander, Condotta and Hinkle.

Staff: Dave Knutson (786-7146).

Background:

Approximately 9 percent of the people in the United States have hearing loss that results in communication problems. Over half of the 26 million hard of hearing adults in the United States are age 65 or less, and 72 percent report that their hearing loss resulted from factors other than aging. Children with hearing difficulties need hearing aids to enable them to learn language and participate fully in the education process, and require new hearing aids regularly as they grow. Not all health insurance carriers cover hearing aids, and those who do often limit the coverage for hearing aids.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

All health insurance carriers and state purchased health care programs that provide coverage for prostheses must also include coverage for hearing aids. Health carriers may utilize cost-control measures to manage utilization. A person must get a recommendation of a physician, advanced registered nurse practitioner, or a physician assistant prior to receiving a hearing aid.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill contains additional cost-control provisions. Prior to being fitted with a hearing aid, a person must receive a recommendation of a physician, advanced registered nurse practitioner, or a physician assistant.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect January 1, 2006.

Testimony For: Hearing aids are very expensive. The personal and societal costs of not covering hearing aids are very high. Insurance coverage for hearing aids is a cost-effective way of addressing this problem.

Testimony Against: Adding mandates increases the cost of healthcare. Businesses are struggling to cover their employee's health care costs.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Flannigan, prime sponsor; Ann Fullington; Greg Fullington; John Allen and Ben Gilbert, Washington State Self Help for Hard of Hearing; Lisa McKay, Washington State Audiologists; Larry Verhei, Hearing, Speech, & Deafness Center; Michael Izak, Washington State Association of Deaf; Dr. Ann Hyman, Quietly Clear; Karen Cook; Laurie Jinkins, Department of Health; and Keith Hiatt, University of Washington.

(Opposed) Rick Wickman, Premera Blue Cross; Gary Smith, Independent Business Association; Carolyn Logue, National Federation of Independent Business; Mellani Hughes McAleenan, Association of Washington Business; and Ken Bertrand, Group Health Cooperative.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: (In support) Donna Obermeyer, Washington State Special Education Coalition; and Susan Izak.

(Opposed) Mel Sorensen, America's Health Insurance Plans and Washington Association of Health Underwriters.